

Re-conceptualising English Language Teaching at an HWU

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Since the 1980s the number of black (including Coloureds and Indians) students in the Historically White Universities (HWUs) has proportionally increased. At the University of Natal, Durban (UND), Black (African) students now constitute 47.4%, Indians 29.6%, Coloureds 2.7%, Chinese 0.1, and Whites 20.2% of students population. Approximately 17 % of Black students enrol for courses that are in the faculty of Human Sciences. In terms of academic staff composition in the Faculty of Human Sciences, approximately 15% is black, 0.1% is Indian, and 84.1% is White. Among many things, this indicates that transformation processes still have room to bring about changes which are no longer an option but a necessity. Like all institutions of learning in this country, the UND experiences pressures that can only be solved through careful engagement and critical thought. However, the pressure exacted by educational authorities and market forces on higher education poses a threat to formative degrees (degrees that expose students to epistemologies that enrich their general cultural and social understanding and critique). This threat is felt particularly by the traditionally non-vocationally specific disciplines, a description that has come increasingly to characterise English Studies with the national decline in the training of secondary educators.

The growing exposure of tertiary education to the market forces referred to above pressurises institutions of higher learning into placing more emphasis on the development of courses that are seen as economically viable because of their vocational specificity. The effect of this on English Studies in the southern African context is, among other things, to raise the profile of the previously minor place (at English medium universities) of *English language teaching*. Since English Studies has historically focused on developing students' skills in discursive critique (by *discursive critique* I mean forms of analysis drawing on literary analysis, but taking as its subject a range of cultural and social phenomena), a move towards attending to

students' language needs should avoid relinquishing this focus. Today's professionals need to be able to utilise language, not only for the writing of business letters and reports, but also for solving problems and generating ideas. Our students would not attain to these fundamental abilities if our language teaching focuses on mere internalisation of grammatical structures and skills in sentence construction, and ignores the importance of teaching language through a focus on language as a discursive entity. Mere internalisation of grammatical structures and skills in sentence construction is not how we should, as a discipline, conceptualise language teaching.

In the 1960s in Britain the emphasis in English language teaching to mother tongue speakers was on developing their ability to identify and name grammatical forms (parts of speech) and to analyse the clause structure of sentences. The examples for practice were constructed for the purpose and decontextualised. The swing to teaching communicative skills and creative writing in the 1970s and early 1980s was motivated in part by resistance against the traditional equation of standard English grammar with good behaviour (Carter 1995; Mgqwashu 1999). The result was a generation of children who lacked the tools to talk or write about language, or to evaluate critically their own use of it. The Language in the National Curriculum Project (1989/1990) reaffirmed the importance of explicit knowledge *about* (as opposed to *of*) language for both teachers and learners (cf. Carter 1990). Research into additional and foreign language teaching and learning has charted a similar path (cf. Polias 2000).

Recent debates about the reintegration of formal grammar into the English language syllabus hinge on conflicting research conclusions about second language acquisition. Krashen (1992:410) insists that a second language is acquired by obtaining comprehensible input, and that 'the effect of grammar is peripheral and fragile', and limited to 'monitoring' what has already been acquired. Sharwood Smith (1988:57), on the other hand, argues for the notion of the interface between learned (explicit) knowledge and acquired (implicit) competence, and claims that 'there is every reason to accept the older, intuitively attractive version which says explicit knowledge may aid acquisition via practice'. Ellis (1993:99) supports a 'weak interface' position, and accepts that grammatical instruction can convert learned (explicit) knowledge into acquired (implicit) knowledge 'under certain fairly stringent conditions'. These conditions can be met, he suggests, if the goal of the syllabus is either to facilitate comprehension rather than production, or, and this is the crucial point for the argument here, if the goal is learned (explicit) rather than acquired (implicit) knowledge (Ellis 1993:105). Supporters of both strong and weak interface theories therefore agree that the introduction of grammar, either by means of getting the learner to 'notice' grammatical forms or by 'conscious-raising'

activities, promotes explicit knowledge.

Cummins (1984) distinguishes very usefully between what he terms Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS), and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). He defines the former in terms of 'the manifestation of language proficiency in everyday communicative contexts', and the latter in terms of 'the manipulation of language in decontextualized academic situations' (Cummins 1984:136-7). While BICS continue to play a role in professional life, CALP is becoming increasingly necessary, partly because of socio-political, economic, and educational changes in the country, on the one hand, and demands accompanying the globalisation process on the other. Teachers of English language are therefore faced with the challenge of developing students in both aspects of language proficiency. Of course there is a distinction between BICS and CALP, but a *simultaneous* development of our students in both skills remains crucial.

The distinction has central pedagogic implications for the teaching of language. Since proficiency can be measured, it may be argued, by a learner's ability to use language for both basic communication purposes and for academic communication, teaching students to master specific grammatical elements (BICS) has to be accompanied by development in skills of discursive critique (CALP). Experience has shown that students who speak English as an additional language (EAL) often appear fluent at the interactive communicative level, but they do not have the more advanced language skills necessary for developing conceptual understanding in the academic context. Carol Macdonald's Threshold Project (1990) and my own study (1999) carried out *in* and *about* the former DET schools respectively, show the detrimental effects that this kind of education can have on the development of CALP skills. The findings by these language practitioners showed that linguistic competence cannot be separated from the cognitive demands of the task, and, therefore, an explicit focus on language needs to be accompanied by raising students' awareness of the relationship between language choices and social positioning. Speaking of the nature of language, Halliday and Matthiesen (1999:602) state that 'language is not a second order-code through which meanings created in some higher-order realm of existence are mysteriously made manifest and brought into light'. According to the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) theory that informs such thinking, language is able to create meaning because

... it is related to our material being in three distinct and complementary ways. In the first place, it is a part of the material world In the second place, it is the theory about the material world In the third place, it is a metaphor for the material world ... (Halliday & Matthiesen 1999:602)

SFL claims that, since we use language in physical space and time, language operates as a theory about our physical existence and experiences, thereby capturing the environment in natural and social processes. In the process, language is able to expose the contradictory aspects of our existence. It is this aspect of language that English Studies exposes students to through the analysis of literary and cultural texts. The approach to language teaching in English Studies, then, has to equip students with the understanding that 'descriptions of language [structures] are completely interconnected with descriptions of the contexts in which language is used' (Unsworth 2000:1). If thought of in this way, language becomes an interdisciplinary phenomenon.

First person pronouns in different contexts, for instance, can be used to convey a range of subtly differentiated indications of the relationships between speakers and audience. 'We', for example, may include the speaker and the listeners. In the family context this will convey closeness and solidarity. But in a job interview the interviewer's use of 'we' suggests the weight or authority of the organisation of which he or she is part. 'We' may not refer to the speaker at all, as when a doctor says to a patient: 'Well, how are we today?' The doctor may be trying to put the patient at ease, but often this usage is seen as condescending and reflective of an asymmetrical power relationship. In a BP advertisement, on the other hand, the reference to 'we' shifts from including the readers or listeners with the company in the statement 'Only we can save the earth' to the company alone in 'We've been doing it for over 15 years by supporting a wide range of conservation programmes'. Only a close critical reading of these texts will reveal that the shifting reference is part of a strategy to appeal to a presumed solidarity with the target audience and persuade them to 'save the earth' by buying BP.

Sensitivity to the shades of meaning in these examples is dependent upon the audience knowledge of *communicative* as well as the *formal structures* of the language, and also of *the context* in which these utterances are made. This teaches us, among other things, that the acquisition of both grammatical structures and CALP skills are bound up with context-specific social practices, and that it is possible to teach both simultaneously. As a language practitioner, I am aware, however, that this possibility has not been fully explored. This has been due to, among other things, the fact that racial and/or linguistic (even school background) categorisations have traditionally been used as indicators of language proficiency. My personal experience, and I think most would bear me out on this, proves that these are no longer good yardsticks by which we may measure language proficiency. Given these changes in higher education, students' educational, linguistic, or school backgrounds, it seems, need not be regarded as fundamental variables on the scope and focus of language development.

The demands on Higher Education that are impacting on the scope and focus of language development can be thought of in two broad categories. The first cluster of demands concerns accommodating students' diversity. Student intake in South Africa has become increasingly diverse, in terms of cultural, socio-economic, and linguistic backgrounds and, critically, their level of preparedness for traditional Higher Education programmes. The second cluster of demands concerns meeting rapidly changing global educational needs. Higher Education institutions, not just in South Africa, but around the world as well, are under pressure to produce graduates with the kind of knowledge and skills called for by contemporary social and economic conditions. There is an increasing need for graduate flexibility, strongly developed 'generic' skills linked to a firm knowledge base, life long learning skills, and problem solving ability.

In the South African context language development work is central to meeting both key sets of challenges referred to. First, language related issues are a principal factor of educational disadvantage, and effective language development work is therefore essential for meaningful equity and redress, and for ensuring that epistemological access is made available to all students. Secondly, language development is clearly also central to the development of key skills such as effective communication, critical reasoning, and life long learning. Thirdly, the expertise of language development staff in crosscutting issues such as assessment and evaluation is a crucial resource for effective programme planning and implementation. Language development courses have potential to assist mainstream structures in developing more effective means of meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse and non-traditional student body.

Given the way universities were ordered, not only along racial, but also language lines, the South African experience of managing change in higher education is complex; and the challenge of transformation has required different strategies in different institutions. The UND Faculty of Human Sciences responded by introducing, among other things, courses that attempt to meet students' language needs. These courses, however, tend to teach either basic communication skills (in a form of grammar teaching), or academic writing and academic critique, with little, or no initiative to teach both of these skills simultaneously. The proficiency required by graduates for basic communication purposes (basic understanding of grammatical structures), in other words, tends to be developed discretely from the kind of proficiency required for academic study and for knowledge creation through writing. This is clear from the way in which specific first level courses approach linguistic proficiency. Academic Learning in English (ALE), the Computer Aided Multimedia Editing Skills in English (CAMESE), the Writing Place Project, and the English Language Course (ELC) represent some of the attempts at improving linguistic

proficiency.

ALE focuses 'on themes such as Language and Identity [which] provide the focus for various activities and tasks around which academic writing practices arise' (ALE advert 1999). This approach to improving language proficiency assumes that all students enrolled for the course already possess basic understanding of, and the ability to use, language structures, and so are able to construct sensible arguments around issues pertaining to language and identity. CAMESE, on the other hand, while it aims 'at teach[ing] language users to identify and edit, out of their writing, a range of grammatical features that adversely affect, either the intelligibility or acceptability of much student writing' (Geslin & Wade 2000), is limited by the fact that 'there is no one-to-one interaction between the learner and the teacher and, as a consequence, very few students actually benefit from this computer programme' (Mgwashu 1999: 54). The Writing Place Project aims at assisting students with essay writing skills by offering them tutoring based on their own written work. The limitation with this programme is that the tutors, most of them undergraduates, have a very limited understanding (in some cases none at all) of how languages are taught and learnt.

Unlike other courses mentioned so far, the ELC, an initiative by the Programme of English Studies (PES), does explicitly attempt to teach students basic language structures. The course states that it intends to 'introduce learners to basic grammatical concepts and encouraging the development of grammatical competence with specific reference to writing in English' (Balfour 2000). My concern though, is that the theory that informs this course does not pay attention to the importance of teaching language through a focus on language as a discursive entity. Since discursiveness is the central focus of the discipline, one would expect that a language course mounted by the PES should be informed by such an orientation. As a teacher who has participated in initiatives of this nature, and who has followed students that passed such courses at the University of Durban-Westville (UDW) and at the University of Natal, Durban (UND), I have noticed that the essays that students produce (regardless of linguistic, educational, or school backgrounds) 'display poor mastery of language as [they] seek to reproduce academic discourse, but find themselves constrained by writing in a poorly understood *language* (language as a basic communication tool and as used in cognitively demanding tasks)' (Mgwashu 2000:64). On these bases I would define such students 'as academically illiterate, since they are unable to use and understand the language of instruction in a form and register appropriate to academic context. Most of such students, as I have mentioned, have either gone through courses that have tended to focus on remedial instruction in the second language, or 'how to' courses in academic reading and writing skills.

As most of you will agree, a low rate of skill transference is cited as one of

the reasons for students failing to apply the skills developed and practised in 'language' courses to mainstream learning. While students may be successful in using language processing strategies to access the generalised meanings which are the currency of many language development courses, they are likely to be less successful when trying to construct a complex web of unfamiliar meanings in a mainstream discipline. I shall argue that, to a large degree, students' failure to transfer the skills learned in language development courses to mainstream disciplines is a consequence of the division between courses that attend to BICS and those that teach CALP skills. According to Gee (1999:2), English language teaching 'ought not to be about teaching English, or, for that matter, about teaching language, at least as these are traditionally construed'. For him (and this is the position I adopt in this paper), language teaching needs to engage students with cultural and social settings within which language production occurs to serve specific purposes. The *challenge* in teaching language is, then, to draw attention to grammatical forms through *stimulating* and *enriching* exploration of their functions.

To formalise the kinds of ideas that this paper has presented so far, Widdowson's (1990:101-104) distinction between 'systemic' and 'schematic' knowledge is helpful. He describes systemic knowledge as the knowledge of the formal structures of a language, 'which it is the traditional business of linguists to account for' and, I would add, language teachers to teach. 'But', he points out, 'this knowledge alone is usually inadequate for interpreting linguistic forms in various individual contexts of use' (Widdowson 1990:104), hence the need for 'schematic knowledge'. Part of schematic knowledge has to do with modes of communication: how linguistic and organisational choices are affected by whether the communication is written or spoken, and the relationship between speaker and audience. According to Widdowson, it is through the *interplay* of systemic and schematic knowledge that we learn language and negotiate meaning. This has implications for the UND Faculty of Human Sciences, where language development initiatives have tended to develop systemic knowledge (formal structures of language) separate from schematic knowledge (modes and contexts of communication).

In addition to students' failure to transfer the skills that they supposedly learn from courses geared towards improving their language proficiency in our faculty, as a result of this *artificial* separation, competition over resources further complicates issues. Given the fact that higher education globally has come under general pressure to do more with less, to massify on a shrinking resource base, and to be increasingly responsible for learning outcomes, the UND Faculty of Human Sciences would not benefit from allowing a proliferation of courses that attempt to achieve the same goal. This time demands innovation like never before as we are

experiencing an unprecedented competition for resources. ALE, for instance, is running short of lecturers to teach the course and, as a consequence, lectures had to be abolished. It has been claimed that the latter had to occur because the lecture material is now provided to students through the website. So while it is taught through tutorials and practicals, which breaks with all the early planning of faculty-wide courses, the web forms part of the teaching tool as well. The initial decision has been to require qualified members of staff, but recently revised by requiring graduate students with specific qualities to tutor in the course. As most disciplines sacrificed their 1A courses in order to give way to transformation processes in the faculty, several colleagues focus their energies on developing and improving 1B courses that have to, first, introduce and, secondly, integrate new students into the specificities of their disciplines. Whether ALE will get enough qualified members of staff as tutors, and whether the move to abolish lectures and replace them with the website as pedagogically sound, remain to be seen. What it teaches us though is that the scale of the need and the scarcity of resources demand both creative responses and critical evaluation.

Perhaps we need to ask: are we really supposed to have four unrelated initiatives trying to address themselves to one problem in the faculty? Do we need ALE, ELC, CAMESE, and Writing Place, all of which require financial and personnel backing, to deal with students' language problems in the faculty? Given the challenges and the resultant shortages alluded to in the example above with regard to one of the courses, it would seem absurd to insist on the status quo. I would argue for a new Language Development Course that would incorporate the teaching of BICS and CALP skills simultaneously. And instead of running the course for a semester (in fact it's three and half months) as it is the case with ALE and ELC, I would argue for a one year course. Furthermore, unlike the ALE and ELC which are seen as 'foundational' and 'compensatory' respectively (see the *bosberaad* report), and thus always recommended for students who speak English as an additional language (EAL) or have particular schooling backgrounds (quite a number of students were discouraged, and sometimes told to de-register from, ALE and/or ELC because of their linguistic and school backgrounds, and were advised to enrol for Language Text and Context (LTC)), this course needs to be designed in such a way that both native and non-native speakers of English benefit from it.

Arguments for formal grammar instruction in a course designed for both native speakers of English and EAL students are provided by research on students' writing available through the Writing Place. Support for formal language teaching to both groups of students has to be seen, however, as a means to the end of good communication rather than an end in itself. With this end in view, grammar will have to be approached through its use in different types of text and context in such a

course. Since linguistic competence cannot be separated from cognitive demands of the task, explicit focus on language needs to be accompanied by raising students' awareness of the relationship between language choices and social positioning. In this way language teaching would become an activity aimed at helping students to understand language as interdisciplinary and not just an entity made up of words and phrases that indicate particular tenses and situations.

Should we have a Language Development Course designed along the lines suggested above, the place for CAMESE and the Writing Place Project would need to be thought through carefully. According to data I collected in 1999 for my Masters research, it was clear that very few students actually used CAMESE. Out of 75 students who were first year students at the time, only 11 students actually kept on using CAMESE until the end of the semester. 64 students never continued with the programme after the first week of their introduction to the programme. Reasons ranged from 'I have too much work to do' to 'the programme does not meet my needs'. In fact, out of 11 students that continued with CAMESE, 7 were from ex-model C schools.

The Writing Place Project, on the other hand, is faced with a degree of responsibility that is in fact above its capacity. Too many students end up unable to meet a tutor because of the limited time allocated to tutoring. Most of the tutors are undergraduates who, in my view, are not necessarily qualified to offer professional assistance appropriate to students' writing needs. Moreover, there is no proper co-ordination between the Writing Place Project and the rest of the faculty. As a faculty we are faced with a challenge to co-ordinate all these initiatives in order to improve the quality of service we give to our students.

With the approach to language teaching set out in this paper as a background, I would argue for a one year Language Development Course integrated with CAMESE. CAMESE would then officially become part of the course and have a slot in the timetable. The Writing Place Project would then be free to work across the various programmes in the faculty to improve teaching and assessment of writing in specific fields of study. This is important because when marking students' written work, lecturers from different programmes vary from penalising students heavily for mechanical and grammatical errors to looking through the linguistic surface and marking on content and organisation. Beyond first year level, skills such as writing and communication should be integrated within the teaching and assessment of the disciplinary content, and my argument is that grammatical errors, content, and organisation have to be looked at during the marking process. Focus on either grammatical errors to looking through linguistic surface or marking on content and organisation, without combining both in assessment is detrimental to students' holistic development in language. The job market has already complained about the

English language proficiency of the students from this university, as the dean's letter to Programme Directors in this faculty points out:

An increasing difficulty for the university executive has been to encounter the perception of the employment market that graduates of this university are not necessarily proficient in the spoken and written language of the professional workplace (Internal Memorandum: July 2000).

I would argue that this observation is a result of our incoherent marking procedures that consequentially produce students with little, or incomplete understanding of the relationship between language choices and the context of language production. The Writing Place is well positioned to help the faculty assessment procedures to be more effective and developmental in nature. Language, after all, is *central* to concept development, and therefore a central issue in teaching and learning.

The approach to language teaching suggested here has the potential to assist mainstream structures in the faculty in developing more effective means of meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse and non-traditional student body. The disadvantage of structuring a course along the lines suggested here is that systematic teaching of the structures of grammar, from, for example, the least complex to the more complex, has to be sacrificed. Students may be left with gaps in their systemic knowledge. However, since research indicates that there is still uncertainty as to the order in which grammatical forms are acquired by language learners, structured grammar teaching is at best founded on a tenuous theoretical base (see Ellis 1993). The compensations of the approach spelled out in this paper are an increased awareness of the relationship between language forms and the functions they can serve, of ways in which context shapes language use, and the means by which we may escape from the traditional resistance to 'the grammar grind'.

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